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ABSTRACT

This report evaluates the dissemination to rural communities in New Jersey of a program previously found to be successful in rural Appalachian communities. The report evaluates the collaboration process between Research for Better Schools (RBS), the New Jersey Rural Assistance Council (RAC), and Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), who developed the program. Family Connections consists of 30 weekly guides designed for use by families in helping their preschool children develop identified skills. Key individuals involved in program dissemination were asked questions about the roles different people played, resources required, decision-making processes, success stories, and problems and resolutions. The collaboration was considered successful due to the following factors: (1) both RBS and AEL benefitted from the collaboration (e.g., the program helped RBS meet its goals for working with the New Jersey RAC, and AEL gained assessment information about the program); (2) key people from both laboratories were compatible and flexible; and (3) RBS and AEL shared costs and responsibilities for promoting the program. Successful program dissemination in New Jersey was the result of support from key leaders in the RAC and in the counties with established relationships with RBS; the "user-friendly" nature of Family Connections in that it is easily understood, adaptable, and relatively inexpensive to implement; an internal support structure consisting of implementation teams, a local coordinator, and follow-up meetings; direct dissemination of the program to people who would implement it; and enthusiasm resulting in schools' willingness to assume the cost for continuing the program. (LP)

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Evaluation of the Dissemination of Family Connections for the Laboratory Network Program

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Research for Better Schools (RBS), in collaboration with the New Jersey Rural Assistance Council (RAC) and Appalachia Education Laboratory (AEL), disseminated the Family Connections program developed at AEL, in five rural counties in New Jersey. The dissemination of Family Connections was done under the support of the Laboratory Network Program's proven practices project as part of their effort to promote the dissemination of proven programs from one laboratory's region to another. The evaluation focused on the collaboration between RBS and AEL, and the dissemination activities in the five rural counties.

The evaluation found the collaboration between the laboratories and the dissemination of Family Connections from the Appalachian region to a state in the mid-Atlantic region to be very successful. Successful collaboration between RBS and AEL was the result of: (1) both laboratories benefitting from the collaboration (e.g., the program helped RBS meet its goals working with the New Jersey RAC, and AEL gained evaluative information about the program); (2) key people from both laboratories being compatible and flexible; and (3) RBS and AEL sharing costs and responsibilities for promoting the program. Successful dissemination in New Jersey was the result of: (1) support for the program coming from the key leaders in the RAC and in the counties who have established relationships with RBS; (2) Family Connections being a "user-friendly" program, easily understood, adaptable, and relatively inexpensive to implement; (3) an internal support structure, consisting of teams (teachers, parents, and principals), a local coordinator, and follow-up meetings, assuring smooth implementation; (4) Family Practices being disseminated directly to people who implemented the program; and (5) financial support for materials and training stimulating enthusiasm for the program that resulted in schools' willingness to assume the cost for continuing the program.

Recommendations for supporting collaboration between regional laboratories included scheduling sufficient time for key people to meet and discuss their collaboration efforts and clearly delineating expectations for how resources (e.g., personnel and funds) are to be used and how, and under what terms, materials will be available to participants who wish to continue the program beyond the initial implementation. Recommendations for improving dissemination of Family Connections across regions included clearly defining audiences for the program by understanding differences in how schools are configured from region to region (e.g., disseminating a preschool program through preschool teachers and parents), clarifying roles of parents on the teams, and assuring that networking occurs among parents as well as teachers.

Introduction

Funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education, the Laboratory Network Program's (LNP) goal is to develop a collaborative system among the regional educational laboratories. Proven Practices, one of several projects sponsored under LNP, encourages the dissemination of "proven programs" across the regions. Specifically, the project is designed to recognize programs proven to be successful in one region and to promote their use in other regions. During the first year, the lead laboratory for this project, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), compiled a list of 29 programs (nominated by eight labs) that met a set of rigorous criteria. The Rural Education Project of Research for Better Schools (RBS) elected to disseminate one of the programs, Family Connections, developed by the Rural Excel Program in the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL). The purpose of the evaluation was to trace the dissemination of this program, found to be successful in rural communities in the Appalachian region, to rural communities in a mid-Atlantic state. This report summarizes the evaluation, beginning with a description of the program, key players in the dissemination process, and early dissemination activities.

Description of Family Connections

The Family Connections program, which has its origins in a home preschool program developed at AEL in the 1970's, was updated, redesigned, and piloted in 1992 in ten schools in Kentucky. The program identifies 59 competencies related to a child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. Consisting of a set of 30 weekly guides, the program is designed for use by families in helping their preschool children develop these competencies. Each guide contains a variety of developmentally appropriate activities and one or more read-aloud selections. In addition, each guide has a short message on diverse child development topics (e.g., physical development, discipline techniques, and different ways children can learn).

The guides are visually appealing and easy to read. Printed on brightly colored paper, the four-page pamphlets are written at a fifth-grade level in short blocks of text with bold headings that identify key concepts. High interest techniques, such as active voice, personal pronouns, (e.g.,"you, us, and we"), and graphics are employed. The cost is relatively inexpensive compared to similar programs (about 20 cents per issue or 13 cents if ordered in bulk). To facilitate the connection between the home and school, the materials are sent home by way of preschool and kindergarten teachers who can incorporate some of the same activities in their classroom instruction as well.

Dissemination of Family Connections in the Mid-Atlantic Region

Three members of the New Jersey Rural Assistance Council (NJ RAC) were instrumental to the dissemination of Family Connections in New Jersey. The interactions of these three people over a series of events (described

chronologically in this section) led to the introduction of the program in one county in the southeastern part of the state. The key council members were the chair, the county superintendent of a southeast county, and the RBS staff person from Rural Education.

The first awareness of Family Connections occurred when the NJ RAC chair was invited by the RBS member to attend the National Rural Education Association meeting in Michigan in October, 1992. At that conference, the chair attended a presentation on Family Connections by the program director of the Rural Excel Program at AEL. The chair became interested because the program addressed two of the state's seven goals in education: (1) that all children come to school prepared to learn and (2) that family involvement increase in the schools. The chair mentioned her interest in the program to the RBS member.

Shortly after the conference, the director of the LNP encouraged all RBS staff at a laboratory meeting to examine the proven practices list for potential candidates for dissemination. Included in the list was AEL's Family Connections. The RBS RAC member decided that this program was relevant to her work with the council. Since the RAC chairperson had already expressed interest in the program, the RBS RAC member decided to present it for possible dissemination to the other members of the council at their November meeting.

When another one of the RAC members (the county superintendent) heard the presentation, she was eager to try the program in her county because it met their educational goals. Since resources were available, through the LNP, for disseminating proven practices, the RBS RAC member recalled, "It all came together very quickly. When the situation is right, you don't have to convince people."

The RBS staff person contacted the lead author of Family Connections at AEL in late November or early December to arrange a workshop. The author recalled that working with RBS "was so easy...just so easy," because Family Connections "clearly met some of [RBS's] goals" with the New Jersey RAC and "they [RBS] took care of the logistics" of organizing the workshops. The author and RBS staff person met in-person twice, but most of their communication was by telephone and fax. The first workshop in the southeast county was scheduled for January 8.

In preparation, the county superintendent met with the 16 district superintendents in the southeast county in December to promote the program. During that meeting, she asked the superintendents to select either a kindergarten or a preschool teacher from their districts to attend the workshop on Family Connections. Superintendents from 15 districts submitted names. One district superintendent chose not to participate because the district was already committed to another program. When she received the names of the teachers, the county superintendent sent invitations asking each to pick a parent to come along to the workshop. In addition, two community organizations, Head Start and United Way, and a literacy volunteer were invited. Everything happened so quickly between the RAC meeting and the first workshop that the county superintendent admitted she "almost called it off because it looked like we might not pull it all together in time." Additionally, she had not personally had time to review the materials, but went ahead with the plans because she trusted the RBS RAC member's opinion.

The responsibilities for conducting the workshop were shared among the county superintendent, the AEL author, and the RBS RAC member. The county superintendent first introduced the Family Connections program, the author next described the program's rationale and the materials, and then the RBS member directed the teacher-parent teams (38 participants) in developing their action plans for implementing the program in their schools. The addition of teacher-parent teams and actions plans to the AEL Family Connections training had been suggested by the RBS RAC member and the county superintendent to strengthen the dissemination of the program. Although the author developed the program to "stand-alone" with a handbook for teachers to use independently, the RBS member thought it was important to give teachers and parents the opportunity to meet and ask the author questions. The author, in turn, was "delighted to have the opportunity to present to the teacher-parent teams," which was a new method of dissemination for her.

A final key decision was made during the workshop while the teams were developing their action plans. Based on their previous experience with program implementation, the county superintendent and the RBS member decided to select a local person to coordinate the teams' efforts after the workshop. The coordinator's responsibilities would include making sure everyone had enough materials, helping publicize the program locally, and serving as a liaison to RBS and AEL. The county superintendent suggested that a retired educator be the coordinator and, thus, the Family Connections Network was initiated. At the end of the workshop, each team received 25 sets of the 30 weekly guides. A follow-up meeting was scheduled in March for reassembling the teams to discuss how the program was going.

Subsequent workshops in four other rural counties followed the same format, with two changes predicated on the experience in the first county in the southeast part of the state. Principals were added to the teams, and one of the teacher-parent teams and the network coordinator from the southeast county discussed their experiences with implementing the program as part of the workshops.

Teams from 100 schools in three counties in the northeast section of the state (146 participants) attended workshops in the late spring, and teams from 12 schools in a coastal county (31 participants) attended a final workshop on June 1. These schools planned to implement the program in the fall of 1993. In each workshop, teams wrote action plans, a local retired educator was identified to coordinate the Family Connections Network, and a follow-up meeting for the network was scheduled. In two of the workshops observed, the division of responsibilities between the laboratories was similar. The RBS NJ RAC member facilitated the conduct of the workshop and directed the writing of the action plans while the author from AEL presented the history and rationale for the program, reviewed the teacher handbook, and answered any questions about the program. The author attended four of the five workshops, unable to attend one of the northeast county workshops due to a schedule conflict.

Evaluation Design

Since the goal of LNP's Proven Practices project is to promote the dissemination of programs from one laboratory's region to another, the evaluation focused on the collaboration between the two laboratories, RBS and AEL, and the dissemination process in five rural counties in New Jersey. A staff member in the evaluation unit of RBS began with a review of the Family Connections materials and then conducted interviews with the RBS RAC member, the AEL author, the RAC chair, three county superintendents, and a sample of workshop participants at the dissemination sites. Questions were asked about the roles different people played, the resources required, decisionmaking processes, success stories, and problems and resolutions. (See Appendix A for the specific questions asked.) Two Family Connections workshops (one for two counties in the northeast and one for the coastal county) and two follow-up meetings (southeast county) of the Family Connections Network were also observed. Appendix B lists the interview respondents and the observed events, dates, and locations.

Evaluation Findings

The evaluation found the collaboration between the laboratories and the dissemination of the Family Connections program from the Appalachian region to a state in the mid-Atlantic region to be very successful. Evaluation findings are reported below in two sections related to the successful collaboration between RBS and AEL and the dissemination of Family Connections. A third section examines the problems and how they were resolved.

Collaboration Between RBS and AEL

- The collaboration allowed RBS to meet the recognized goals of a state in the mid-Atlantic region. The program was relevant to the education goals of the state, the counties, and the school districts (i.e., for all children to come to school prepared to learn, and to increase family involvement in the schools).

- Compatibility existed between the key people from RBS and AEL. The RBS staff person and the author were, as the author remarked, "very comfortable working together" and "that is not trivial." The compatibility was due, in part, to the personalities of the key people, but also the result of flexibility and the sharing of resources and responsibilities.

  RBS and AEL shared and invested funds to promote the program. RBS paid for all the Family Connections materials distributed free to the participants, and the author's travel for the first presentation. Later, AEL covered the cost of the author's travel.

  The laboratories also shared the responsibility for disseminating the program. AEL was responsible for printing and sending the materials. The RBS staff person handled the logistics of the workshops, while the author from AEL presented information on the program and was available to answer questions. AEL analyzed the results of the workshop evaluation forms and sent the results to RBS. AEL made certain the districts received materials when shortages were discovered.

- The collaboration was mutually beneficial to both laboratories. In addition to meeting RBS's goal to provide service to the RAC, AEL learned about problems and benefits which contributed to their continued evaluation of the program. For example, since teachers were not using the handbook as anticipated, AEL is developing two videotapes, one for teachers and one for parents. AEL contacted school personnel directly for permission to gather additional information from teachers and families.

Dissemination in New Jersey

- RBS has an established relationship in the state as a member of the NJ RAC. The RBS member was familiar with the state and rural counties and their educational goals. Due to this existing relationship, key decisionmakers in the state acted quickly when they learned about the program and the opportunity to disseminate it.

- Family Connections is a "user-friendly" program. It can be adapted to local situations, is relatively inexpensive, and is easy to implement (i.e., no lengthy training or preparation) compared to other programs for involving families.

- Family Connections is easy to understand and visually appealing. The content and activities appeal to common knowledge and do not introduce highly abstract concepts.

- Support for the program came from the "top." The chair of the RAC and the county superintendents were all visible and enthusiastic about the program. Principals and chief school officers were included on the teams.

- An internal support structure (Family Connections Network) was established consisting of teacher/parent/principal teams, action plans, and a local coordinator to assure the smooth implementation of the program. This structure maintained the enthusiasm generated during the workshop that can often dissipate after that workshop is over.

- Teachers and parents who had success with the program shared their experiences with and, in turn, learned from other schools in subsequent workshops, thus increasing the program's local validity.

- Key people in RBS, AEL, and the state were experienced and knowledgeable about dissemination procedures.

- Family Practices was disseminated directly to the target audience. Teachers and parents who implemented the program attended the workshops and received the materials. They learned about the program first-hand and had the opportunity to talk to the author. Participants learned from the first workshop that administrators needed to be included to facilitate permission to implement the program.

- RBS and AEL invested resources in the materials and workshops, which subsequently led to increased dissemination in New Jersey. Teachers and administrators tried the materials without feeling pressured to buy the program. The coastal county purchased its own materials based on the word-of-mouth enthusiasm for the program in the southeast county. Several of the participating schools have since generated funding to maintain the program.

- The formation of the Family Connections Network and follow-up meetings for the teacher-parent teams provided the opportunity to share success stories and solve problems. The local network coordinator in the southeast county took responsibility for maintaining contact with the county superintendent and RBS, for making sure all the teams had the right number of materials, and for consolidating and sharing ideas among the teams.

Dissemination Problems and Resolutions

- Some schools had to delay implementation in order to obtain board approval. It was suggested that administrators be involved from the beginning to identify these types of problems. Principals or other chief school officers were added to the teams.

- A shortage of materials caused a delay in implementation in some schools in the southeast county. AEL packaged Family Connections for groups of 25 students because, in their region, kindergarten classes are limited to 25. Since New Jersey can have as many as 30 students in a classroom, there were shortages in some schools. AEL supplied the needed materials, or materials were pooled from other classrooms or preschool programs that did not need all of their packets.

Recommendations

The following recommendations suggest ways to improve both collaboration and dissemination practices in general based on the results of this evaluation.

Improving Collaboration Between Regional Laboratories

- Time is needed for the key people in the laboratories to reflect on their collaboration efforts and to base decisions on those reflections. Distance and time constraints did not permit the RBS and AEL staff persons as much time as they would have liked to fully discuss how the workshops were going and to make decisions accordingly.

- Expectations need to be clearly defined from the collaborating laboratories about the time and funds available for dissemination activities. RBS and AEL staff persons did not anticipate the increased demand on their time and expenses to disseminate the program when other counties wanted the program.

Improving Dissemination of Family Connections Across Regions

- Although the support network for program implementation was vital, the follow-up meetings need to focus more on what families are doing. Often parents did not attend the follow-up meetings, resulting in networking among the teachers but not the parents. An independent study for the New Jersey Rural Assistance Council suggested that parent involvement would improve if team members were given explicit roles and responsibilities in implementing the action plans, and parent roles were visible to other parents.

- Target audiences for the program need to be clearly identified. The program's intended audiences are preschool children and their families. Since teams were comprised mostly of public school kindergarten teachers and parents, several of the participants commented that some of the activities or read-aloud sections were "too young" for their students and were more interested in the second volume of Family Connections for five to six-year-olds (available in the fall, 1993).

- The collaborating laboratories need to be familiar with education law in the different regions and any modifications these might require for dissemination and implementation. For example, many public schools in the mid-Atlantic region do not have preschool classes and the primary means of dissemination in New Jersey was through public school teachers and parents.

- As a result of how schools are organized in different regions, disseminators of the program may need to consider other team configurations for disseminating Family Connections. Teams that include both private pre-school and pubic school teachers and parents can serve to connect families from community-based pre-schools with the public schools as their children transition into kindergarten.

- The collaborating laboratories need to decide, in advance, how and under what terms the materials will be made available to participants who wish to continue the program beyond the initial implementation (e.g., whether the schools contact the originating laboratory directly or make requests through their regional laboratory).

Appendix A

Evaluation Questions for Family Connections

Collaboration Between the Laboratories

- How did RBS become aware of the Family Connections program? Why was it selected?
- What roles did RBS and AEL play in disseminating the program?
- What resources were required to disseminate and implement the program?
- What factors were important in making the cross-lab collaboration work? Describe the decisions and decisionmaking process.
- What continuing roles have RBS and AEL played in supporting the program? Dissemination to other sites?
- What would make the collaboration go more smoothly?

Dissemination Process

- How did the participant sites learn about Family Connections?
- What process was used to disseminate the program? Who were the key players and what roles did they play?
- How was participation solicited? How was participation supported?
- Where and how were materials produced and disseminated?
- What are the success stories to implementation?
- What were the unexpected problems? Solutions?
- Recommendations for change?

Appendix B

Persons Interviewed and Meetings and Workshops Observed

Interviewees

- RBS RAC member who was responsible for disseminating the program
- AEL lead author of Family Connections
- Three county superintendents in New Jersey (two are also members of the Rural Assistance Council)
- Chair of the New Jersey Rural Assistance Council and member of the state board of education
- Family Connections Network coordinator in the southeast county
- Three parents
- Developmental kindergarten teacher
- Regular kindergarten teacher
- Elementary school counselor

Meetings and Workshops Observed

- Two follow-up meetings of the Family Connections Network in the southeast county
  March 22 and May 14, 1993
- Workshop for two northeast counties
  April 27, 1993
- Workshop for the coastal county
  June 1, 1993